

WESTERN ILLUSIONS ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST

Stability as Far Off as Ever

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EVER since the 19th century, when so-called reforms were introduced in the Ottoman Empire, Western observers have watched Middle Eastern politics with hopeful expectancy. Yet the Middle East has seen no quiet and found few solutions over the last hundred years. Violent and arbitrary rulers have steadily succeeded one another in attempting drastic remedies, but all to no avail. The troubles of the Middle East are, obviously, not passing ones, and would seem symptoms of a deep social and intellectual crisis such as the schemes of reformers and the good will of philanthropists could hardly alleviate. Nevertheless, the idea that Middle Eastern instability is endemic has found little favor either in England or America. Every new revolution in this area is still greeted as the herald of a new day, and every new outbreak of trouble as the necessary and beneficent prelude to an epoch of orderliness and justice.

The meliorism of Western liberals, the activist categories and hopeful concepts of their political science, go far to explain this attitude, as does also their conviction that a stable, universal peace can be established only when the whole world is composed of democratic and progressive nation-states. Whatever the worth of this notion, it is not one that a statesman should act on. To him, it should not matter whether the events he

has to cope with are milestones on a road leading somewhere, or mere variations on an eternally repeated theme.

English and American policies in the Middle East, together with the doctrines and principles which justify them, are an example of the large part that mere verbalism and dubious dogma can play in the forming of doctrines and the shaping of policies. That the Middle East is remote, with traditions and codes of behavior that are alien, should not by itself have led to misunderstanding of its problems; the unfamiliar may invite caution as well as recklessness. Nevertheless, the remoteness of the Middle East has made it difficult, and in many cases impracticable, to judge in the light of common sense and experience certain interpretations of Middle Eastern history and politics offered to the Americans and the British by interpreters who seemed expert and well placed.

Among the most influential of such interpreters in America are missionaries. Their case is curious: they went out to proselytize and have stayed to sympathize.* To America they began, some fifty years ago, to present a picture of Islam as a strictly unitarian, democratic, and egalitarian version of Protestantism. The task before Christians, they said, was not to make converts from Islam to Christianity, but rather to lean over Middle Eastern society with compassion, to take it by the hand and lift it up out of centuries of superstition, corruption, and oppression. Essentially and basically, Islam was enlightened and progressive. The Western education which they, the missionaries, provided would serve to make Moslems aware of the true values of their religion and to inculcate

AMERICAN and British writers on the Middle East have traditionally assigned its troubles to causes which can be removed by economic progress, greater political liberty, and the satisfaction of national claims. These views are here critically analyzed by ELIE KEDOURIE, author of *England and the Middle East* (1956) and a historian who teaches at the London School of Economics.

*See "Islam and Arab Nationalism" by Joel Carmichael in the July 1957 issue of COMMENTARY.

in them a sense of brotherhood toward the Christians, who, after all, worshipped, albeit in their own manner, the same true God as the Moslems. And in fact, this was what Western education was already bringing about in the Middle East. Enlightenment was spreading, rulers were acquiring a public conscience, and democracy was becoming stronger every day.

Events to the contrary notwithstanding, missionaries are still saying all these things. "The time seems ripe," writes the Reverend Erich W. Bethmann, "to usher in the era of cooperation—a cooperation based on mutual respect for and esteem of the deep spiritual qualities inherent in both religions. These qualities are a part of every believing Moslem and every believing Christian, finding in each their deepest realization in prayer, love and mercy; and 'where prayer, love and mercy dwell, there God is dwelling too.'"

Such interpretations of the Middle East are difficult to shake, and not only because their sponsors are authoritative and well placed; there are at least two other factors that permit them to go unchallenged.

The first, as has been said, is the Middle East's remoteness. One of the simplest and most effective means of keeping in touch with reality is to compare what people say with what they do. In one's own society, where one has a relatively clear conception of one's own position and interests, and is familiar with the meaning of the words used and with the implications of behavior, this test seldom fails. But it is not so easy to apply it outside one's own society.

A country like America is, even at best, unlikely to have a clear and settled conception of what her own interests are in every place in the world where events have now compelled her to have a policy. Alien conventions and unfamiliar language add particularly to her uncertainty on this score. Reports are ambiguous or faulty; actions dissolve in a haze; causes and consequences alike appear shadowy and insubstantial; those in power in remote places seem to be defined more by current legend and doctrine than by the fact that they are men of flesh

and blood who take bribes and make conspiracies, who deport, imprison, and kill. Assumptions about such men tend to remain abstract and untested by experience; rulers and politicians are taken up and praised for what they say rather than for what they do.

This tendency is reinforced by a second powerful factor. When the language of modern English and American politics, which has now been adopted by the whole world, is divorced from the tradition in which it has value and dignity, it becomes a debased, inflated jargon, a showman's patter by which tyranny is made to seem constitutional, and crookedness to look straight. The seeming familiarity of this language serves more than any exotic remoteness to confuse and entrap the mind. All explanations become smooth, all theories plausible. "Therefore," we read of our condition in Holy Scripture, "is the name of it called Babel because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth."

THE arguments of the American missionaries have their equivalent in Britain. The English version of Islam is not identical with that of the missionaries, but tends to the same conclusions. Orientalists and commentators on Oriental affairs have succeeded by now in spreading a deep sense of guilt among the English intellectual and political classes. The West, they have argued, has sinned grievously—out of ignorance and also out of presumption and cupidity. Contemptuous of Eastern values, it has taken advantage of Eastern weakness to impose its domination. In its pure, untroubled state, Islam is more wholesome than Western civilization. It forbids drunkenness, prohibits usury, and makes class warfare very difficult. And what has the West, what has England, done? It has let vice loose in the East, it has made cupidity attractive, it has shattered the harmony of society.

There is enough truth in all this to make it seem plausible, but the passion and the tenacity with which these conceptions are advanced speak for neither the judgment nor the discretion of their authors. They

have not been content merely to expound a theory of the nature and history of Islam. They have condemned, rebuked, and recommended. They have said that the acts of France and England after the First World War twisted and distorted the political development of the Arab countries. It is asserted that there were at that time upright, moderate Arab nationalists who were prepared to cooperate with the West and to follow modern, enlightened, and progressive policies. They were thwarted and betrayed, therefore driven to violence and extremism. England conspired with France and the Zionists to deny the Arabs their just claims and to bring ruin on them. The least that the West can now do is make amends, and repair the moral and material damage it has done. Henceforth it must promote and guarantee Arab unity, support Arab nationalism, and provide ample, unconditional economic aid to the Arab countries.

All this, of course, is by now a familiar argument of Arab propaganda itself, but it was formulated and perfected originally by English writers and scholars. They were encouraged in their attitude by two circumstances. The first lay in historiography itself—in the way that Anglo-American historians were dealing with recent political events. Some of the most influential versions of the origins and consequences of the First World War were based on the assumption, or rather the conviction, that it was all due to powerful and sinister interests which tried to advance their aims through secret diplomacy. Had diplomacy been open, it was argued, many disastrous consequences of the peace would have been averted, and governments would not have dared to avow, even to themselves, much less try to pursue, their illicit and dangerous ambitions. The Allies had arrived at their settlement of the Eastern question by means of secret agreements, and this of itself was enough to compromise that settlement, which paid no particular heed to pan-Arab ambitions, and to make it immoral, dishonorable, and worthless.

The other circumstance which has contributed greatly to the current British picture of recent Middle Eastern history is an accidental one, but its consequences have nonetheless been prodigious. The accident was the involvement of T. E. Lawrence and his friends in Middle Eastern affairs. Lawrence started as an outsider, but rose to fame and power in a few short years. He lacked both the *esprit de corps* and the understanding of his country's position and interests which could be obtained solely from regular practice in governmental and diplomatic negotiation. His apologia for the Arabs was violently eccentric, and out of all relation to the facts. This, in itself, is not surprising. What is surprising, and disheartening, is that British statesmen and politicians who were neither outsiders nor eccentrics should have embraced a version of history so inimical to their country's interests and so contemptuous of such traditional instruments of rule as her army and civil and foreign services.

The burden of Lawrence's complaint, and the refrain of his supporters, was that a great act of injustice had been done to the Arabs by reactionary politicians and their ridiculous civil servants. These men, ignorant of the new forces in the East, had shown criminal weakness in the face of the diabolical designs of France. Lawrence and his friends spoke with an air of authority, not as mere students of politics. They had been there, in the new Middle East, they were acquainted with the new Arab leaders, and they recommended them wholeheartedly to the British public. Again, what is surprising is not so much Lawrence's own extravagance as that of his friends, men of birth and breeding, in taking up and sponsoring upstart, tediously fanatical conspirators altogether lacking in political sense and style.

THE result of the activities of the missionaries in America, and of the Orientalists and Oriental experts in England, has been to establish that the two most important political issues in the Middle East are

"Zionism and imperialism." It is asserted that these are at the root of instability in the area. If one could somehow manage to remove them, or to convince the Arabs that they had been removed or at least neutralized, then there would be a real prospect of peace and prosperity. But is either "imperialism" or "Zionism" really capable of being settled as an "issue"? And, even if they were settled, would peace and progress follow automatically in the Middle East?

The *immediate* issue in the Middle East today may be the conflict between Israel and the Arab states, but the *necessary* and larger issue is the rivalry and dissension among the Arab states themselves. It is this rivalry—not Israel—that led to the formation of the Arab League, which has now become the main theater of the struggle for ascendancy among the Arab states. Palestine was from the first, and remains, the most important instrument and pretext for this struggle, just as the Palestinian Arabs, together with the Jewries of the Middle East, have become its main victims. But even if the Palestine problem were "solved," even if all the Israelis were exterminated, the Middle East would still be without peace; there would follow a great quarrel over the spoils, and issues even more intractable than the present ones would soon emerge.

Imperialism, as an issue of practical politics in the Middle East, is even more fundamentally irrelevant than Zionism. What can it mean to say that imperialism has to be eliminated before peace can be assured in the Middle East? Today all it can mean is that what British and French influence is left in the Middle East has to be liquidated. But this obviously would not entail the liquidation of the influence of the other great powers. On the contrary. And to replace English and French with American and Russian influence and rivalries would not necessarily secure greater prosperity or a firmer peace. If, however, what is meant is that peace cannot come to the Middle East until all great powers are deprived of their influence there, then the "anti-imperialists" are talking nonsense.

Aside from the fact that Western sentimentality alone permits one to consider great powers nasty and small ones virtuous by definition, great powers acquire and hold influence in the Middle East by necessity today, and for obvious reasons. A Middle East from which the influence of the great powers were entirely absent is utterly unthinkable in the foreseeable future. Thus the contention that peace in the area depends upon the elimination of imperialism has turned out to be an empty slogan which further confuses and debases the language of political discourse.

OF COURSE, the liquidation of English and French power and influence in the Middle East might work to the benefit of the United States, and all the jargon about imperialism, it may be argued, is designed to lay down a smoke screen behind which the United States can better pursue her particular interests. If so, must the elimination of British and French influence remain a permanent aim of American policy in the Middle East, and will it really help to establish the influence of the United States in the area? The fact is that the exclusion of Britain and France will strengthen Russian as much as it will American influence in the area.

We already know how such situations work out. Russia's absence from the Middle East after 1917 left England and France facing each other alone there, so that the traditionally triangular or quadrilateral game played with the Eastern Question, as it had been perfected in the 19th century, could no longer go on. The hostility to France that colored so much of the English political attitude between the wars made it seem safe, reasonable, and attractive to edge her out of the Levant, so that England would remain the sole dominant power there. As it turned out, this led to the undoing not only of the French position, but of the English position too. The very same arguments that were used, with British encouragement and applause, against the French were later turned against England.

History, it is true, neither teaches lessons nor repeats itself, and where England failed the United States may still succeed. However, if America and Russia are left alone as the only great powers in the Middle East, they will both be forced into the same posture. They will be compelled to try to outbid one another. And with Russia alone as competitor, it does not seem that it will be easier or more fruitful for the United States to ride the anti-imperialist wave than it was for her to do so with Britain as a competitor. It may well be more difficult. England tried to ride that wave and promoted the Arab League; and like the old man of the sea, the extravagant rhetoric and inflated ambitions conjured up on that occasion now hang on to cramp and cripple all attempts on Britain's part to follow a saner policy. Not only is anti-imperialism in the Middle East either irrelevant or nonsensical as an issue of practical politics. It also tends to increase misunderstanding, promote illusions, and befog issues, all of which works to the benefit of irresponsible agitators and those who know how, and do not scruple, to use such agitators. In that kind of game, the peaceable and civilized forces always lose.

TIDY doctrines, then, will not help, and simple answers will deceive. Middle Eastern disorder is deep and endemic, and the disappearance neither of Israel nor of "imperialism" would cure or even mitigate it. The effort to modernize Middle Eastern society, to make it Western or "democratic," must itself inevitably bring about evils, some of which may turn out to be greater than the benefits.

It is said that the prosperity brought to certain Middle Eastern countries by oil, by Western aid, and by increased economic activity will in the end produce that middle class hitherto notoriously absent from Moslem history, and that this class will prove a bulwark of constitutionality and freedom. This hope is based presumably on an analogy with European and American development—but one that happens to be

quite false. The middle classes in Europe and America climbed to power by their own efforts, without the help of the state, and sometimes against it. And whereas economic enterprise was in the West predominantly the affair of individuals, in the Middle East it is predominantly the affair of governments.

The British government neither opened up the coal mines of the British Isles nor claimed a share of their profits from the mine owners; similarly, the government of the United States did not demand that every Texan who found oil in his back yard give up half the value of his property to the state. It may be argued that this freedom from government interference has caused great inequalities, and that the benefits of the new wealth were distributed in proportion neither to merit nor to need. This may well be, but such a consequence is inseparable from the libertarianism, the independence, and the mistrust of authority traditionally associated with the middle classes in the West, and which, it is now hoped, may somehow be transplanted to the Middle East. But in that area government is the chief entrepreneur; it receives the oil royalties and the foreign aid, and it is through its decisions and its favors that prosperity filters down to the mass of the people.

In Europe the middle classes attained political power after becoming economically dominant. It looks as though modern economic processes will lead to no such result in the Middle East, since there they only confirm and accentuate what **has always** been a characteristic of Moslem society, namely the dependence of all ranks and classes on a central political authority. Now, as in the past, wealth depends on access to political power, on the benevolence, or at least acquiescence, of those in power. In an area where political power is traditionally capricious in its transmission, and tends to be acquired by violence and established by repression, it is the caprice of those in power, rather than the impersonality of the economic process, that gives so-

ciety its predominant character and its characteristic visage.

What must also tend to confirm the Middle East in its condition is that its new, "modern" wealth does not come at all from local enterprise, but descends like a sudden windfall, as the tribute which a miraculous providence has compelled Europe and America to press upon the East.

THE European administrative techniques that have been put at the disposal of the governments of the Middle East have enabled these to exert a more minute and systematic control over social and economic life than before. New methods of import licensing, exchange control, and fiscal supervision have made private enterprise more dependent than ever on the good will of those in authority. The latter are now able, when they choose, to punish the objects of their ill will with a new swiftness and effectiveness. It was thanks to modernized administrative methods that the Iraqi government was able to despoil the Jews of that country so efficiently, and that the government of Egypt was able to follow in Iraq's footsteps so easily. Insofar as this new power of government makes the dependence of economic life on political power more complete it must hinder the emergence of that independent middle class on which so much hope is set.

Nor does the increase in the power of government affect the economic sphere alone; it reaches in all directions. What modernization of society there has been in the Middle East is not the result of private initiative and of the gradual adaptation of local traditions. It has been imposed from above, by decree, and carried out as far as possible by officials. This has meant that the traditional articulations of Middle Eastern society must either bend to the will of the reformer or be completely sundered. Thus Moslem as well as non-Moslem religious and communal organizations, with all their local particularities and vested interests, have been greatly weakened of late. Individuals are made equal under the law

and corporations are made creatures of statute, but law and statute themselves express the irresistible will of a central and sovereign authority. The Westernization of Middle Eastern society has, so far, only made it more helpless in the face of the state. Thus Westernization has given new life to political attitudes immemorably prevalent in Moslem society, confirming the subject in his passive obedience to his ruler, and the ruler in the amplitude, if not legality, of his power. Political stability in such a situation remains, of necessity, precarious. Traditional checks and balances have grown progressively weaker, and the subject has more reason than ever to fear his masters. On the other hand, to obtain power, it is sufficient to get hold of the conveniently centralized mechanism of control, and the rewards of power have become larger than ever.

As a result, political instability in the Middle East has been increased. And the character of the men who now compete for power increases it still further. These are indeed new men, whose earliest and deepest political impulse is contempt for the ways of their fathers. Youth, which in most countries and ages has disqualified one for rulership, has become since the days of the Young Turks an advantage. The dislocation of society is made more acute by estrangement between the generations. Those who possess the European techniques which Middle Eastern society must adopt if it is not to perish, are the young. Therefore they feel not only that they know better than their fathers, but that they have the key to salvation. Their recklessness and passion, their conviction of their fathers' ignorance and folly, their inexperience and clumsiness in the exercise of power, combine to deprive them of that decorum and *gravitas* which impressed foreign observers in the Moslem ruling classes of the past, and which served to restrain the latter in their greed and cruelty. Heaven knows that sedition, treason, and civil war were common enough in the Middle East in the past, but only now has revolution become

glorified as a *necessary* part of the political process, violence been proclaimed beneficent, and treason holy.

The institutions, and the men who control the institutions, thus conspire to make Middle Eastern politics the sport of civil commotion. It has been so ever since the Young Turks came to power, and there is no sign of any change for the better. This situation alone makes it prudent to continue to expect trouble in the Middle East, and not put too much faith in simple solutions and neat explanations.

But there are still other factors that should make us cautious—factors which have to do directly with foreign policy. The Moslem doctrine of international relations recognizes only two possible situations: either war on the obdurate infidel, or the latter's submission to the authority of the faithful. Peace with the infidel *de jure* is impossible; until he recognizes the authority of a Moslem ruler there can only be various grades of active or passive hostility. Such has been not only theory but practice in the relations of Moslem and Christian powers. The chronically unsettled state of the frontiers between Israel and her neighbors is nothing exceptional; unrest and violence have normally been the case on the frontiers between Christendom and Islam. The notions of international law and practice current for centuries in the West, notions like the concert of powers, the comity of nations, the sanctity of treaties, rules of natural justice, decent respect for the opinion of mankind—all these are quite alien and largely unintelligible concepts to the Middle East.

IT is significant that the Ottoman Empire was formally made a member of the concert of Europe only after the Crimean War, when it had lost its strength and was being taken in tow by the Christian powers. It is not surprising, then, that to Moslem minds the Western vocabulary of international relations should appear to have little

relevance to what is their most important preoccupation: the steady encroachment by Christian powers on the domain of Islam. Moslems see the same lack of relevance to their own concern in the two major products of the Western theory of international relations, the League of Nations and the United Nations. When these institutions were set up, the Christian powers seemed to the Moslems to have become more powerful and dominating than ever, and all the more a threat to Islam. The Moslem states think of themselves not as mere quiescent members of the comity of nations, but as fighters engaged in an active struggle against the very powers that claim to set the tone and establish the criteria in international relations. Their adherence to Western principles of international relations is as formal and empty as was Turkey's admittance to the Concert of Europe in 1856.

These traditional Moslem attitudes have only been confirmed and fortified by nationalist doctrine, which has been the most popular and the best understood of all Western political ideas in the Middle East. The theory of nationalism is as little disposed as Moslem doctrine to envisage a stable international order as a practical possibility. Moslem thinking postpones this to the day when the last infidel shall have made his obeisance to the Caliph; nationalist doctrine postpones it to the day when all national claims shall have been satisfied. Both are subversive of international stability, both are activist, both consider conflict not a regrettable evil, or even the continuation of diplomacy by other means, but, so long as a single imperfection subsists in the world, or so long as a single principle remains unrealized, a duty the carrying out of which is exhilarating and rewarding.

Against this attitude no simple strategy avails. Resource, cunning, patience, and steadfastness can hardly cope with it. And even these will fail if it is thought that they can do more than keep disorder at bay.